



Guidebook 2: **Special Interest Choirs**

Here we look at choirs in the community that are friendly to, and made with, people living with conditions like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's. These choirs support people, their families, and carers.



Contents

Ageing Voices Introduction	3
Introducing Ageing Voices Guidebooks	4
Singing for Health and Happiness	5
Special Interest Choirs	6
Case Study: Dara MacMahon	7
Case Study: Fiona Flavin and Brendan Scahill	8
Case Study: Norah Constance Walsh.....	10
Recommendations	12
Additional Resources	13
About this Initiative	14



Ageing Voices Introduction

Singing connects us. Lullaby, vesper or pop song chorus. Week nights in school halls and community centres. Across pub or kitchen tables. In the cultural palaces. Interweaving voices coming together in song reflect and reinforce the threads of national life we're woven into.

In Ireland the fastest growing section of the population are people over 80. People living well in their 60's and 70's are a growing percentage of the population which will continue into this century. Traditionally attention has been given to the individual voice as it develops from baby's coo through teenage mumble to adult voice. Now that many of us are lucky enough to live longer and singing brings such pleasure, isn't it time attention is given to the older and the ageing voice?

Fun, therapeutic, social, and stimulating singing already takes place in groups, choirs, health centres, even hospitals. Older adults who sing might be fit as a fiddle or challenged by illness. Innovation connecting singing with care is happening across Ireland. With Ageing Voices we are sharing learnings from the practices of these groups in order to encourage other like-minded people to get involved and bring the joy of singing to their community. We are on a mission to map and connect a network of these great people who have quietly evolved these groups over many years. We thank those with the wisdom to start the work we are now continuing.

Dominic Campbell
Creative Aging International

Dermot O'Callaghan
Sing Ireland



Dominic Campbell



Dermot O'Callaghan

Introducing Our Ageing Voices Guidebooks

Sing Ireland and Creative Aging International have come together to create a range of resources that will encourage and explore singing into older age, with support from The Creative Ireland Programme.

We believe that singing is invaluable. That it is a vital tool in the health and wellbeing of older people in our communities. That is why we have created four guidebooks that have been designed to give people the tools they need to create, run and nurture singing groups for older people within their communities.

1.

The Ageing Voice. This guidebook focuses on the voice as an instrument. What happens as we age? How can we maintain and sustain our voices? What happens if we do?

2.

Special Interest Choirs. Here we look at choirs in the community that are friendly to, and made with, people living with conditions like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's. These choirs support people, their families, and carers.

3.

Community Connections. This guidebook shares learnings from projects where cultural leadership has been connecting organisations through song in pursuit of care.

4.

Singing For Care. Our final guidebook discusses singing in healthcare settings and is particularly focused on sharing the experiences of groups led by nursing staff and care staff who sing and share their singing with those in their care.

Each guidebook will provide you with information, expert advice, recommendations, case studies and resources, to guide you through the process of setting up and running a singing group for older people. Our resources are continuously being developed, so if you have information to add, or need specific details please contact Sing Ireland or Creative Aging International, we'd love to hear from you.

Singing for Health and Happiness

Why singing is so important as we move into older age.

We should state at the beginning that singing is important in older age for all the reasons it is at any other age. It's about connection and belonging, it's about finding a place for your voice amongst others, it's about listening and being heard, facing challenges and building confidence.

/ Singing's secret weapon is joy.

Singing is physically good for you. Your heart, lungs, and vocal cords get a work out every time you sing. The brain blossoms with the challenges of learning new parts and adapting to sing alongside others. The endorphin release of performance or the dopamine of practice are all fantastically good for the brain and the body.

Singing into older age can help to keep the body fit and healthy, to keep the mind sharp and the voice strong. It is an exercise regime that keeps you active. As we age group singing and choirs can begin to seem like a daunting prospect. Aspects of growing older can become obstacles that stand in the way. From failing hearing and eyesight, to unsure bladders and reduced bounce, our bodies can hold us back. Transport systems and architecture that are difficult to navigate make getting to practice more of an ordeal, and that's before we have to think about reading small fonts, standing for long rehearsals, remembering the words. These many challenges are often individually tiny but they can add up. However each and every one of them can be easily addressed by considerate choir members and thoughtful choir



leaders, and overcoming them will lead to enhanced confidence, self-awareness and mental strength in our participants.

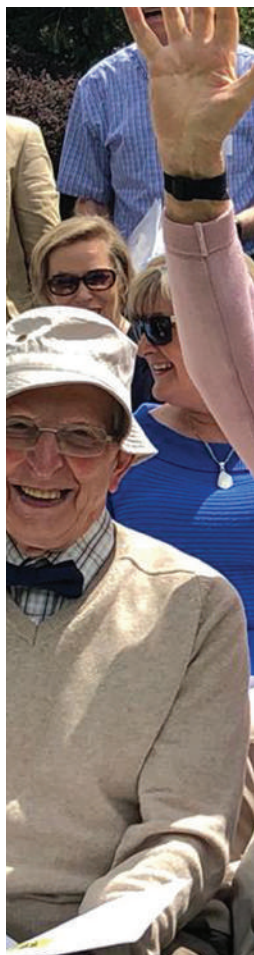
/ The value of the social interaction, support network and friendship that comes as part and parcel of joining a choir cannot be underestimated.

The challenges of isolation, the insidious subtleties of ageism, the despair of loneliness can all be addressed when a singing group is vitally connected into, or is, the connector of its community. Our case studies illustrate that even the most difficult moments of ageing and vulnerability, like life with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or living with Parkinson's, can be lessened and life enriched by a supportive singing group, led with attention and developed with care.

Choirs nurture care. As this programme develops we're recognising that a choir's social function in communities and workplaces should not to be underestimated for their mental, physical and social benefits. They operate in parallel to formal health care services and in some enlightened initiatives offer models of collaboration between agencies that bring care to the heart of the republic.

Older age is filled with innovation as we adapt to physical and emotional changes. A wide repertoire of song helps all of us find the resilience needed for life's inevitable challenges. As more of us live longer lives perhaps we also need to make new music to help us explore this unprecedented experience.

Special Interest Choirs



In recent years we've seen the creation of choirs supporting people living with brain health conditions that are more prevalent in older age, like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's. We've also seen community choirs evolving into these types of choirs as their members age and they wished to keep singing.

/ The impact of many of these diseases is reduced by the social connection of a singing group, and by the processes of music making.

There is a long, rich and proud heritage to the work of these groups. In the 1970's Robert Smith, editor of the British Medical Journal wrote,

/ "If health is about adaptation, understanding, and acceptance then the arts may be more potent than anything that medicine has to offer."

Groups that set out to be inclusive and welcoming are continuing to evolve this tradition. As public health and science catches up, new understanding and training is becoming available with the intention of supporting both the individual, at all stages of these difficult illnesses, and their partners, families and friends who are impacted.

Music is hardwired in the brain. We "hear" the rhythms of a mother's heartbeat before birth, and music in the form of lullabies, crooning and baby talk are pathways into speech and comprehension. We understand rhythm, pitch and tempo before, and for some people after, we are able to articulate words. As pre-language children our brains learn much about movement and communication through the elements that make up song, and often this remains accessible through music.

Learning new music supports cognition and neural facility while articulating words and sounds is a therapeutic process made much more palatable when they are lyrics and song.

Singing can offer a channel of communication when other faculties like spatial memory, facial recognition, and movement are challenged. Musical patterns and rhythms have been shown to help patients with Parkinson's navigate their balance and movement.

Even for people with advanced conditions, music and singing can trigger memories, comfort and joy. Moments that might create a spark of recognition or reduce stress, fear and anxiety. Singers may not be able to articulate where they are, but they can articulate how where they are makes them feel. Even in advanced stages of illness people can improvise music with sensitive support.

/ Feeling happy is the secret sauce of singing groups.

While medical framings of disease isolate one illness from another, people are rarely that regular. Across most stages and states of illness enjoyment of singing, whether we are listening as an audience, a singer in a group or even the creator of new music, is possible and accessible.

Music can help relieve depression and anxiety, but perhaps the most important thing a regular singing group can do is address fear. An individual's fear of becoming isolated from social connection or a carer's fear of managing the unknown challenges of caring for someone with a transformative condition.

For carers the support of a social group can be vital. Many describe how taking on the duties of care for a loved one can be deeply rewarding, a reminder that what is most valuable in life can often be filled with fun.

/ Singing groups offer respite, support and distraction as well as a chance to exchange experiences with others.

Case Study:

Dara MacMahon Move4Parkinsons



In 2012 the Move4Parkinsons movement launched its first community choir with the aim of building a 'community of support, positivity and fun'. Dara MacMahon has a professional music background and her directorial debut with Move4Parkinsons began in 2014, with a room of four people (two couples) in a Primary school hall. To say the choir has grown into a success story since then is an understatement.

The choir now consists of nearly fifty participants, including people with Parkinson's, their family, friends and supporters, and it has kick-started an independent carers' monthly support group. The choir itself features prominently in 'Wicklow Sings' choral festival and has collaborated and partnered with Bealtaine Festival, National Grandparents Day and many local and regional initiatives.

/ The Move4Parkinsons choir has given a voice to those living with Parkinson's in Ireland and are advocates for increased supports and awareness.

Dara insists that the choir are 'singers' and that what they do is not 'art therapy'. When people come to the choir, they are accepted for who they are and where they are at. Democracy and equality are paramount within the group. Invariably people say to Dara (like every choir Director) 'I can't sing'. Her job, she says 'is to meet their ability, ensure they are enjoying it and are challenged'.

Parkinson's can present unpredictable symptoms. People with Parkinson's may easily feel isolated – the choir aims to welcome those with the disease, and the people supporting them, inclusively, and ultimately to create a sense of community.

Vocal tone, facial expression, cognitive and physical function may all be affected by Parkinson's and singing can effectively target all of these. Dara cites the social, emotional and physical benefits of singing, and she says she sees a range of impacts with participants.

/ Couples can share something together, people are going out more socially, and there are also plenty of memory and posture improvements.

Dara believes leadership, teaching and musical skills, combined with an awareness of the implications of the disease on individuals, are necessary for facilitating a singing group like this. She suggests attending rehearsals, shadowing and mentoring as ways to increase the number of groups in other locations. She identifies key skills such as flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness for choir leaders as necessary in terms of building sessions and rehearsals around the needs of participants (she uses a range of tools and techniques including warm up routines and exercises, simple rounds, memory tricks). Practical assistance with administration and management of the choir venue, bookings, teas/coffees, transport is core to the smooth running of the organisation and if possible works best when there are fixed roles and designated people.

/ "You need to adapt and modify your routine to the participants."

Dara says the choir never forgets its members and that when they pass, it is tradition for the choir to sing at their funeral. Families stay in contact, many stay singing with the choir. Such is the strength of connection and bond built up amongst members over the years.

Case Study:

Fiona Flavin and Brendan Scahill Singing for the brain

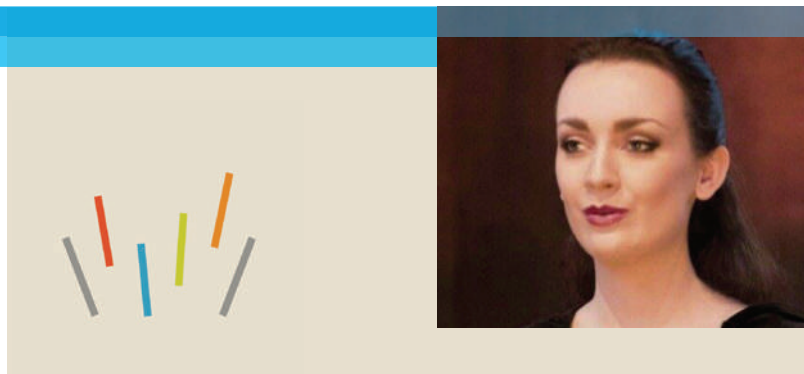
Fiona Flavin is Musical Director and founder with 'Singing for the Brain Ireland' based with HSE Cork Kerry Community Healthcare. Brendan Scahill is a HSE Community Healthcare worker delivering a range of well-being initiatives across the same area. 'Singing for the Brain Ireland' is an extraordinarily successful story of a collaborative interdisciplinary model rolling out in communities, welcoming people with dementia and their carers to singing groups.

The Crystal Project in Mallow was set up to support people with dementia and their families and provides a community-based dementia resource. They piloted 'Singing for the Brain' with the aim of

/ “looking for ways to engage people that weren't dementia specific.”

Initially starting as a six-week pilot project, 'Singing for the Brain' very quickly gained momentum, growing into a six-month project. Brendan and his colleagues almost immediately identified the potential of the pilot. Over the following five years, leveraging support within the community healthcare system, the model was successfully developed into a permanent funded programme in eight locations across Cork city and county, with weekly attendance per venue averaging between 30-40 attendees.

At the heart of the 'Singing for the Brain Ireland' model is a meticulously researched, highly organised approach to facilitating singing sessions for



people, including those presenting with dementia. Each session lasts an hour and a half and begins with a warmup of playful voice exploration. The first half of the session is focused on memory recall with the emphasis on Fiona's input to the group, then there is an all-important break for tea/coffee and socialising, before the second part of the session where Fiona welcomes the group's responses and input.

/ “The chat and interaction are just as important as the singing.”

What are the impacts of regular attendance? Fiona cites improved cognitive function, increased socialisation and responsiveness, in addition to increased confidence and energy. She speaks about singer's increased pride in themselves and, in re-visiting songs from the past, a renewed sense in their culture and heritage. She points to individuals 'taking the songs home with them' which she feels is healthy in terms of normalising memory issues.

Fiona's approach emphasises responsiveness, openness and meeting people 'where they are on the day'. She believes confidence as a singer herself is crucial - along with group facilitation skills.

/ She thinks it's beneficial to understand as much as possible about the condition people are coming to the group with but that this should not define their role or contribution to the group.



Both Brendan and Fiona identify factors which made the model a success. They have established a steering group supporting the overall development of 'Singing for the Brain' and a team of community-based workers, who collaborate with Fiona and the other facilitators on day-to-day delivery (venue/refreshments/welfare).

Brendan explains that the process of introducing the model to a new community involves partnership with the established community networks to identify and invite participants to attend 'taster' sessions. While this works successfully for them, he believes for other groups, even relatively small amounts of money can go a long way. He suggests cross sector community collaborations and relationships should always be considered.

In order to meet demand for singing groups, Brendan and Fiona have hosted training sessions. People who apply might be passionate about singing, or health, or community. Part of the training involves shadowing a singing session because they find people learn best through apprenticeship. As a professionally trained musician Fiona understands the appeal of 'bringing her whole self' to work within the healthcare environment and the skills they look for are often personal skills like compassion or collaboration, or enthusiastic attitudes that seek to solve any challenge as it arises.

Brendan's aim is to expand 'Singing for the Brain' towards the East of the county. For the moment, sessions have moved online, where not surprisingly they have been hugely successful in connecting with older people in isolation during Covid. So successful in fact that a national online singing session has evolved.

As to why people are drawn to sing, particularly now at a time of unprecedented mental and emotional anxiety and stress with Covid 19 – Brendan suggests 'it takes people out of themselves'. Fiona says

“As a singer, I felt how healing singing can be – and now I see it.”



Case Study:

Norah Walsh The Forget Me Nots Choir



Norah is Musical Director of the Forget Me Nots choir since 2015. The choir was originally formed by Orla Horn in 2014 in response to her Mum developing dementia. Orla wanted to find a recreational outlet that they could enjoy together and she had heard about 'The Unforgetables Chorus' founded in New York in 2011 and decided to try to replicate the model in Ireland.

The choir consists of a core group of 60 members with some nursing homes attending on a rotating basis (average of 80 in attendance per week). Hugely successful and with a significant national public profile, the choir has a waiting list and meets once a week attracting Dublin's North East communities. During the summer, attendance drops to 30-40. During Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, numbers on Zoom rehearsals varied between 50-90 participants.

/ The choir welcomes all people including those with dementia, their families and carers. The emphasis is on inclusivity, openness and enjoyment.

Like many other community choirs, the Forget Me Nots has accelerated the development of a range of social connections including smaller friendship groups, car-pooling, WhatsApp groups. All aspects of people's lives are celebrated and remembered.

A 'How to Zoom techdesk' was established during Covid 19 for choir members. Volunteers sprang into action for supportive 'ringarounds'. In response to potential social isolation and mental health issues arising from Covid 19, the choir established 'Silver Lining Fridays'. This initiative featured exploration of subjects and live performances by invited singers for people to enjoy from the comfort of their own homes.

Norah suggests that the role of the Musical Director for a choir like this is an important one. The support structure necessary to maintain a choir of this size on a day-to-day basis is also crucial. In the case of Forget Me Nots, a Ladies Choir provides valuable volunteer support in organisation, planning and administration. In terms of leadership and management, Norah recommends developing a strategy to keep the focus on what is best for the choir themselves (she gives examples of being invited to events in the past to perform but they do not always line up with the practical needs of the choir). She is very clear that the members of the choir should be the priority in any planning.

/ Norah confirms that there is a rich and diverse social mix within the choir and says she is aiming to engage each person to feel 'part of something bigger'. She stresses that what is on offer is a 'quality arts experience'.



Encouraging people to bring their true selves as they are, on any given day requires Musical Directors to be responsive, adaptive and to juggle the unknown. Norah acknowledges the biological, social and emotional benefits to participants but also stresses the importance of a structured and organised approach so as to keep everyday rehearsals interesting and enjoyable. She suggests ‘layering’ the choral experience to allow for mixed abilities.

Norah’s approach is one of equality – every singer is treated the same. She recognises that her role requires essential teaching skills, sociability, leadership and an awareness of the implications of dementia. Her repertoire aims to balance excellence musically with ‘keeping the brain active’ incorporating memory work and exercises.

/ “You need to get to know and understand what they want to sing, we usually have a diverse glut of suggestions for material.”

Creating a safe, supportive space (and the continuity of this) is absolutely key to the experience of the Forget Me Nots choir experience. Norah recommends this is fundamental for singing. The best responses happen when people feel ‘safe, nurtured and secure’. The strong sense of community and support within the Forget Me Nots extends to supporters and families of singers – nowhere is this more evident than when a choir member passes. Frequently, a singer’s carer and/or family continue to sing in the choir.

/ “The choir supports each other, leans on each other and greatly supports each other.”



Recommendations



1. Sort out the how, who and where

It's important to think about the practical side of things before you get members. Where will you practice? Who will help with contacts? So, you need insurance? There's lots of help for these questions here, at Sing Ireland – setting up choirs: <https://www.singireland.ie/content/files/Sing-Ireland-Setting-up-a-choir-2020.pdf>

2. Recruit within the healthcare community

Connect with healthcare workers who are trusted in the community. They can recommend the choir to any patients that they feel will benefit from it. Occupational therapists, district nurses, GPs can all be contacted.

3. Repetition, regularity and reliability

It is important to meet regularly and to stick to a routine that participants are comfortable with. The reassurance of an ongoing routine can be vital for the mental health of participants.

4. Ask and understand

Get to know your participants and make sure that they are happy and comfortable within the choir. Recognize the different levels of experience and illness and work within the parameters they create.

5. What might you sing?

Shape your repertoire around your members, listen to their suggestions and create music that they want to sing.

6. Be prepared

Like any other choir, you need to be prepared, but also have a back-up plan in case something doesn't work or proves to be too difficult.

7. Learn from others

Contact other choirs and listen to their advice and guidance, they can save you time and worry, as they've been down this path before and know what works and what doesn't.

8. Performance

Performances can unite and inspire a choir. Be sure that your performance is suited to your members and doesn't undermine the confidence you have helped them develop. Don't underestimate the importance for self worth of being seen.

Additional Resources

Follow the following links to find additional resources, training and networks:

Additional resources regularly updated are available at www.singireland.ie/participation/ageing-voices-resources including

Special Interest Choirs panel discussion featuring people mentioned above can be found here <https://youtu.be/k0YXBR9Tuf8>

Featured groups: Move For Parkinsons Choir
www.move4parkinsons.com/our-activities/the-voices-of-hope-choir/

Singing For The Brain www.artsandhealth.ie/2020/04/19/singing-for-the-brain-online-initiative-now-opening-up-to-the-public/

The Forget Me Nots Choir www.forgetmenots.ie

Sing Ireland offer many useful resources
www.singireland.ie/participation/aging-voices-resources?token=tZQ66kxfGZ-tYjD255vWONbGJJb_bRb_

Setting up a group
www.singireland.ie/content/files/Sing-Ireland-Setting-up-a-choir.pdf

Choir governance resources
www.singireland.ie/content/files/Sing-Ireland-governance-for-groups.pdf

Members insurance info
www.singireland.ie/content/files/Sing-Ireland-Insurance-for-groups-2020.pdf

Fundraising for groups
www.singireland.ie/content/files/Sing-Ireland-Fundraising-for-choirs.pdf

Understand Together is a great aid and guide to living well with Alzheimer's or dementia in Ireland. Alzheimer's Ireland are the national support body while The Parkinson's Association are similarly useful for people with a diagnosis of that condition.

- Understand Together – www.understandtogether.ie
- Alzheimer Society of Ireland – www.alzheimer.ie
- The Parkinsons Association of Ireland – www.parkinsons.ie

Dementia Inclusive Singing Network in Scotland <https://singing.luminatescotland.org/>

Singing for Health Network <https://singingforhealthnetwork.co.uk>

Music for Dementia <https://musicfordementia.org.uk/expert-blog/>

Scottish Music and Health Network <https://smhn.hss.ed.ac.uk>

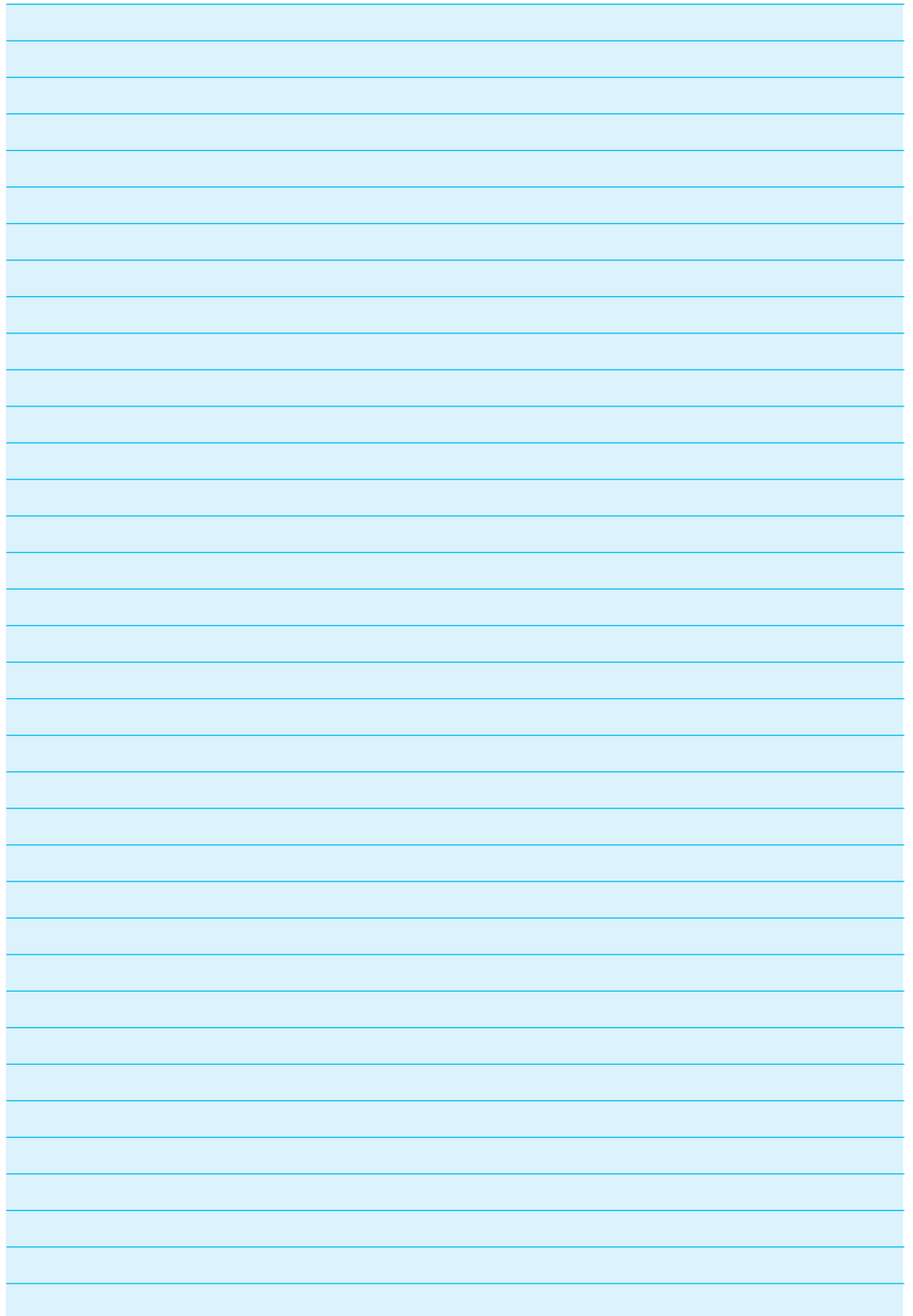
Playlist for Life www.playlistforlife.org.uk are useful for finding stimulating music to listen to especially <https://www.playlistforlife.org.uk/bbc-music-memories/>

<https://m4dradio.com/> is a group of radio stations broadcasting 24 hours a day

Sidney de Haan Research Centre:
www.sidneydehaan.wordpress.com

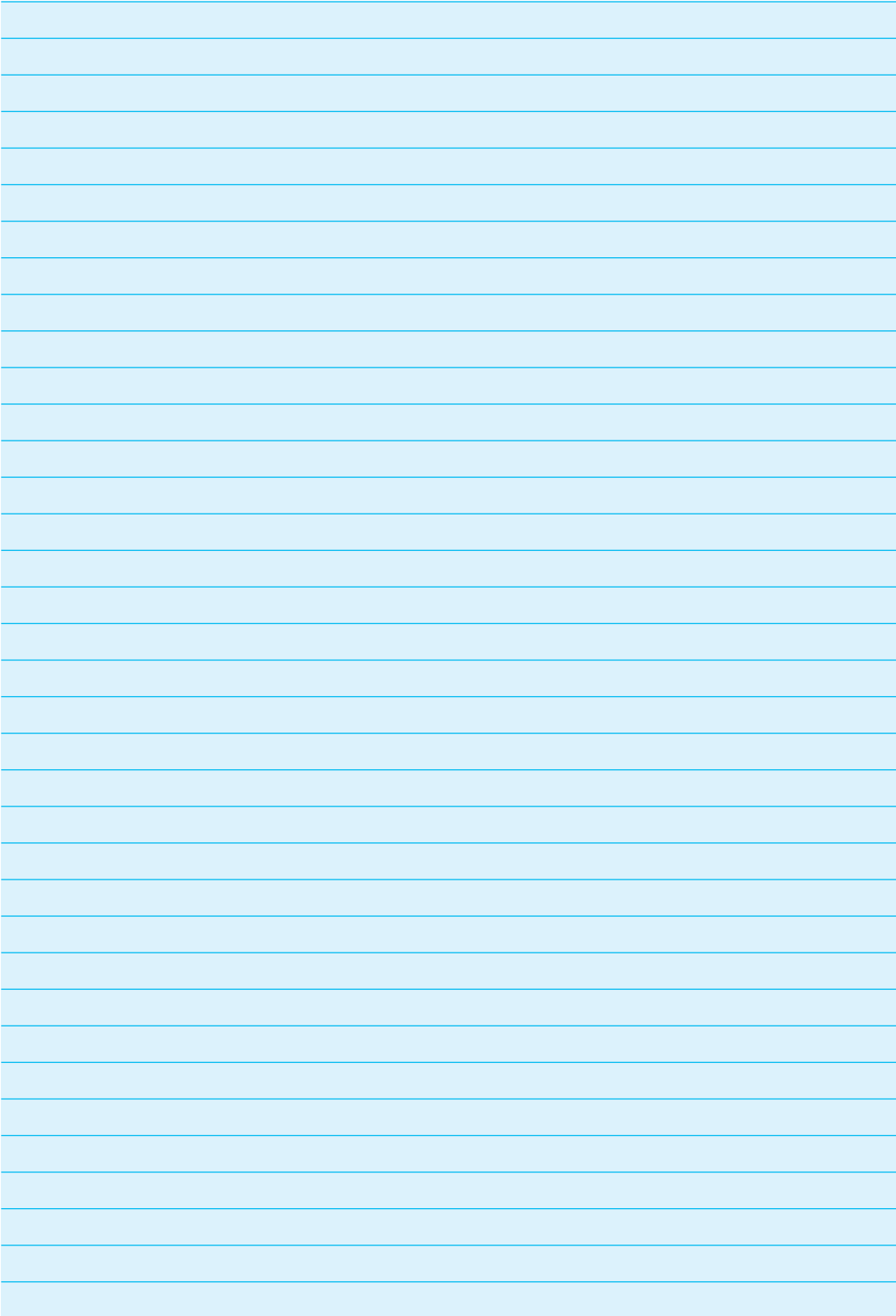


Notes





Notes



Get Started

Singing is fun, therapeutic, social, and stimulating and is a great tool to help older people keep active and involved in the community. If you are currently involved and would like some advice or support, or if you are considering starting a choir in your area, please get in touch.

About this Initiative

Sing Ireland is the national development agency for group singing in Ireland. We lead, enable and connect communities of singers in Ireland.

Creative Ageing International celebrates ageing. We work creatively with communities, companies, individuals and organisations worldwide to transform for the better how we view and approach old age.

In the early stages of the pandemic both organisations connected on **www.dawnchorus.ie** with the aim of connecting isolated older people through song. This started a conversation about the wider role of group singing and its connection to the growing number of older people in Irish society.

This led to involvement with generous support from the Creative Ireland programme. This five-year programme connects people, creativity and wellbeing is an all-of-government programme committed to the vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential.

Ageing Voices was conceived as a way for all of these agencies to work together to ensure that choirs aimed at our older generation have the support, resources and expertise they need to keep singing.

Written by

Dominic Campbell, Dermot O’Callaghan,
Rebecca MacLaughlin, Aisling O’Callaghan

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all individuals and organisations involved for their continued support in the development of this programme:



**CREATIVE AGING
INTERNATIONAL**

Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme
2017–2022

